**1. Title:**

The Artist’s Voice. The role of podcasts in an online encyclopaedia of arts, culture and heritage

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The podcast that has been put online is called “ESAACH E-Pack Podcast - Poet Dennis Brutus”

**2 Context**

“The future is already here - it is just unevenly distributed.”

Science fiction writer William Gibson’s insight into the relationship between 21st century society and technology resonates with my own sense of the correlation between higher education and e-learning, and especially m-learning. Our university shares with other institutions in the non-G8 world the challenge of realising a future that calls for the seamless harnessing of new information and communication technologies to the service of learner-centred, constructivist education.

The tremendous increase in the use of podcasts in education, information and entertainment over the past five years has been driven by the rollout of mobile devices on which they might be played. Since my first experience of podcasts in 2006 when it was still possible to home in on pioneering initiatives such as the Battlestar Galactica Podcast Commentary (Moore 2006) and the Journal of the American Medical Association abstracts (JAMA 2006), podcasting has become ubiquitous.

**3 Challenges**

My continued involvement as a member of the research and development project team, the Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage (ESAACH) has framed my investigation into the possibilities of introducing podcasts into e-learning materials in literary studies. At the start of this Podcasting Course in 2009, I had made arrangements to co-present a literature studies course at the university, and use the opportunity to explore the introduction of storytelling podcasts. In the context of a literature course with a group of students, there would be opportunities to use podcasts both as conveyers of “best practice” where students could be exposed to the expertise of established performers as exemplars, but also be engaged in recording and distributing their own podcasts, learning the techniques of audio recording, good voice production and stimulating an interest in storytelling in their audience all at the same time.

Alas, this was not to be. Unexpected changes in university management during 2010 required me to take on a much more time-consuming administrative role, thus preventing my participation in the literary studies class and effectively depriving me of a set of test subjects for my intended project. Nevertheless, I was able to alter the focus of my podcasting project by concentrating on an extension of the ESAACH Wiki that was also high on my research agenda, but which did not require (at least at the development stage) a “live” group of students. This project required the design and production of a “proof-of-concept” podcast of an author reading his or her own work. Encyclopaedia entries in the 21st century may start with concise textual overviews of the subject at hand (in the case of the Verbal Arts section of ESAACH, the subject is invariably a South African writer), but the nature of the medium invites additional content in the form of full texts, links to other websites, and audiovisual material. The ESAACH team had been exploring the addition of NSC-level learning materials to the encyclopaedia entries of authors and works that appeared on the list of prescribed books. The intention was to explore the design of such materials, so that they could be used as teaching resources as well as stand-alone tutorial material for pupils. Members of the ESAACH research team had prepared learning materials around the theme of “Identity” based on Mapoleng wa Selepe’s “My Name”, H.C. Bosman’s "Unto Dust" and Bessie Head’s “Deep River”. Interactive online content had been added, including some rare full text content, and self-test quizzes on plot and characters. While podcast readings of authors’ work had planned, preparation of the materials had not yet been undertaken.

The development of a “proof-of-concept” podcast was therefore a most appropriate choice of project as it would allow the development of a valuable element of ESAACH Wiki while I developed my skills via the Podcasting Course. My choice of author for the first podcast was prompted by the death, at the end of 2009, of veteran South African poet and activist, Dennis Brutus. As a long-time admirer of Brutus’ verse, I had the opportunity to record an interview with him during a 1997 Literature Conference at the University of Durban-Westville. During the interview I had asked Brutus to read a few of his best-known poems. At the time, I had hoped to include portions of the recording on a planned South African Literary Encyclopaedia CD, but was eventually unable to use the material, and had stored the tape away unused. Under the circumstances I felt that including Dennis Brutus’ reading would be the most appropriate for the first ESAACH Wiki podcast. On the podcast, he reads two short poems: “A Simple Lust” and “Stubborn Hope”. A little more on the background is included in my own commentary in the podcast (see Annexure A, the podcast script).

**4 Problem Statement**

How might an arts and culture audio segment (an author reading his/her own work) best be integrated into an online learning package (the ESAACH E-pack, the “learning backpack” in the Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage Wiki).

To formulate this another way: what is the most effective design for a podcast of an author reading his/her work as a component of a set of online learning materials in terms of:

(a) Length of podcast.

(b) Balance of content between commentary and author reading.

(c) Relation to the website content.

(d) Choice of standard introductory content for the series.

(e) Choice of voice “personality” for the introduction.

(f) Selection of authors (This is a critical sub-problem, but falls outside the scope of this project. Selections decisions are made according to the requirements of the ESAACH project)

**5 Theory**

My study of e- and m-learning and their flexibility in delivering on both learning and educational management is founded on two key principles - for the methodology action research; and for the learning activities, a learner-centred, constructivist approach.

In line with the approach of Killan (et al), the lecturer as researcher/facilitator places reflective practice at the centre of the lecturer’s role (Killen 1996). Typical of this approach is the action research cycle (see Section 6: Methodology, below).

However, these assumptions are tempered by an ongoing dialogue with the implicit technicist tendencies that often lurk beneath the surface of technology-enhanced learning approaches. The Luddites smashed machines, not because they were reactionary, but because they wanted to protect human values in the face of exploitative economic practices. The inventors of the i-pod introduced a learning device of massive potential, but glib, quick-fix solutions are no answer to ensuring an equitable and effective distribution of educational ICT, with its subtle points of emphasis and the critical need to avoid the managerial tendency to put the technological cart before the educational horse.

The bald fact that trumps the more nuanced arguments of educational theorists – balancing transmission against constructivism - is that global trends in business that favour measured, results-orientated approaches, and that glorify task over process, performance measurement over accomplishment have thoroughly permeated higher education management worldwide. This is not entirely to dismiss the notion of a more economical, responsive and socially accountable education system, but it does sound a caution where “business practice” is inimical to sound educational principle; where – ironically - a system shaped by a utilitarian business model can undermine and destroy a flexible learning environment designed to develop and promote the very self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit needed to deliver a prosperous future with greater benefits for all.

Semenov (2005: 14) makes the point clearly and simply: “We believe that ICT will be a key factor in future positive change – provided they are in the possession of people who use them creatively and for the common good.”

Semenov goes on to point out that success in a knowledge economy is dependent on quick, decisive problem-solving skills and the ability to find, retrieve and apply information to new situations. It is this kind of successful individual we aim to develop in our higher education system, and it is inconceivable outside an ICT framework.

**6 Methodology**

An action research approach involving the development of a proof-of-concept podcast allows an open-ended design process that encourages experimentation and even failure to broaden the success potential of the final product:

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| actionresearch.jpg |
| Figure 1 Action Research Cycle |

Prototype 1 – Proof-of-concept podcast (action) → Critical Review → Refine/Re-design → Prototype 2

Jean McNiff’s definition (2010: 3) ties the concept to the work of the practitioner thus giving a constructivist slant to the approach:

Action research is a term which refers to a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be. Because action research is done by you, the practitioner, it is often referred to as practitioner based research; and because it involves you thinking about and reflecting on your work, it can also be called a form of self-reflective practice. (McNiff, 2010)

As indicated earlier, changes in the circumstances surrounding the project reduced the scope of the “critical review” phase, but even with the limited evaluation by myself and one other member of the ESAACH team, a significant amount of development work and re-design was possible (see the discussion of the choice of an appropriate “anchor” presenter’s voice for the series below).

**7. Design**

Podcasts are part of spectrum of audiovisual and interactive learning tools that include video, chat as well as more traditional full-text articles and training manuals. Podcasts in particular are versatile learning objects that can be consumed without having to lock the learner to a particular screen, desk or piece of text. The Apple Mac marketing pitch for educational podcasting depicts a student commuting to work while listening to a lecture on his i-pod headset. I personally listen to podcasts on the way to work nearly every day. In the classroom, podcasts can be rapidly produced and edited by lecturer and students alike.

The proof-of-concept podcast produced for this project is intended to slot into the ESAACH E-pack, which we describe as a “learning backpack” in the Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage Wiki The podcast link is included on the home page entry for the featured South African author. This podcast is one in a series where we are able to listen to important South African writers speaking about their work, so we can reflect on their skills, and consider the significance of their writings in the context of our history. The listener is urged to read the text of the author’s words, and the other material linked to the Author page of the ESAACH Wiki at esaach.org.za

The technical aspects of restoring poor quality recordings for re-recording as podcasts are not a trivial matter. Many of the materials available for the ESAACH podcasting project are old recordings, sometimes stored on media that are not easily playable any longer (e.g. reel-to-reel tapes, 16mm film and neglected audio cassettes). My 1997 recording of the interview with Dennis Brutus required a considerable amount of digital restoration to bring it to a point where it could be successfully incorporated into the podcast. I had made the decision in 1997 to record the interview on video tape in case the video could be used at a later date (this was a decade before the advent of Youtube, and broadband Internet). I was concerned at the time that the audio quality should be as clear as possible, and for that reason I arranged to use a soundproof language laboratory cubicle and secured a separate microphone for the recording. Even though I carefully monitored the recording at the time, using a headset, the resulting recording contained a continuous high-pitched buzz that was most likely produced by the neon light fitting in the room. This audio defect was obtrusive enough to make the interview virtually unlistenable, so to prepare the podcast insert for the project, I had first to filter the audio track digitally in an attempt to diminish the noise and enhance the vocal part of the track. I managed to achieve an acceptable result, using Adobe Audition as the digital audio editing application. I have used the same technique more recently in an attempt to restore 4 interviews with past University staff members also recorded in the late 1990s, but from a poor-quality audio cassette tape (see Section 8, below). In this latter exercise I did not achieve such satisfactory results and failed to suppress background tape hiss without producing unacceptable “artifacts” in the recording of the voices, such as unwanted echo, and a thin, reedy tone. The advantage in the case of the noise in the Brutus recording was its consistency, that made digital detection by the software simpler, and the elimination of those specific frequencies more exact. The final result in the podcast is quite acceptable, although a certain warmth in the timbre of the reader’s voice has still been lost.

Although it was beyond the scope of this project, I used the opportunity to experiment with replacing the old distorted soundtrack on the video recording itself with the newly-restored version and managed this successfully. The result is a fully-restored digital video version of the interview on a DVD.

Hence the project has added a very valuable set of skills to the ESAACH project team in the realm of digital restoration.

**8 Implementation**

Piloting the proof-of-concept podcast was limited to seeking feedback on the podcast from a single available member of the ESAACH team, who confirmed my own misgivings about the accent of the original “anchor” presenter I had used. The intention of the anchor introduction is to provide a standard, recognisable aural signature to the series. Dedicated radio podcast listeners will be familiar with, for example, the standard introductions such as that of the BBC: “This is a download from the BBC …” spoken in that distinctive plummy English for which the broadcasting organisation is famous. The intended target listeners to the ESAACH E-pack podcasts were predominantly second language South African learners and teachers, so we felt that a voice with an African accent would be preferable. Fortunately, I was able to corner another member of the ESAACH team who was in Durban for a project meeting and persuade her to rehearse and then record the standard introduction. Even this procedure was evidence of the flexible nature of the new technology – I was able to record the segment in a beach front hotel room during a break in the meeting, using my indispensable digital Dictaphone.

A later editing session using Audacity enabled the replacement of the original “hot potato” accent on my first introduction with the warm and articulate timbre of my ESAACH colleague.

**9 Reflection**

As a final note: My main regret during this very valuable podcasting project period is having lost out - in the latter part of the course - on regular face-to-face meetings with my fellow lecturers. This was unavoidable in my position as Acting Executive Dean. The effect of networking and the value of being part of a community of practice is a powerful element of work-based professional development, as I have experienced in other courses offered by the Edtech programme. My immersion in academic administration diminished my involvement in the community of practice around my primary research team (ESAACH) let alone with my fellow podcasting course colleagues. However, having previously experienced a similar separation anxiety from my abiding interest in innovative technologies (when I took up a similar acting position in 2007), I was able to make more versatile use of the Blackboard LMS which I had established as a faculty information and interactive decision-making instrument. The steep rise in the number of podcasts in the EXCO Online Media Centre attests to this displaced enthusiasm. Some of those subsidiary podcasting projects may be seen in Figure 2, ranging from Ministerial radio statements to an Honorary Doctoral acceptance speech to historic archive interviews with retired City Campus staffers.

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| EXCO_online_media_library_screendump-1.jpg |
| Figure 2 Podcasts on Faculty of Arts an Design EXCO Online |

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**Annexure A – Proof-of-concept Podcast Script (Intro and Outro)**

(Youtube link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ni5kM0l8Qzs)

**Dennis Brutus Podcast Script**

***MUSIC 1***

Welcome to the ESAACH E-pack, your learning backpack in the Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage Wiki.

This podcast is one in a series where we listen to important South African writers speaking about their work, so we can reflect on their skills, and consider the significance of their writings in the context of our history. Be sure to read the text of the author’s words, and the other material linked to the Author page of the ESAACH Wiki at esaach.org.za

***MUSIC 2***

The famous South African anti-globalisation activist, apartheid sport boycott organiser and – most importantly for me – poet – died just after Christmas in 2009.

Over twelve years ago, in 1997, I recorded an interview with Dennis Brutus during a literature conference at the University of Durban-Westville. At the time, I was working on my doctoral research project, investigating e-text development for Southern African literary studies. Wanting to explore the possibilities of embedding audiovisuals into the hypertext database, I approached Dennis Brutus and asked him to read and comment on some of his poems, and read a few poems by another South African poet, Arthur Nortje, whose work Dennis Brutus had edited and published after Nortje’s untimely death while still a young man in 1970.

The extracts we’re about to hear are two of Dennis Brutus’ most applauded and memorable poems – both short, expertly crafted précis that reveal the passionate core of his belief in freedom and conviction in the power of verse as an expression of protest and resistance. Appearing in a radio interview together with legendary British poet, W.H. Auden, Dennis Brutus famously disputed Auden’s view that poetry could change nothing. “I am the living refutation because it was through your poetry that I became a poet all over again after I had abandoned it for ten years”.

***MUSIC 3***

Now

***Conclusion***

Thank you for downloading this podcast from the ESAACH E-pack, your learning backpack in the Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage Wiki. You will find more information on this and other podcasts on South African writers at esaach.org.za